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S E C R E T TUNIS 000448

C O R R E C T E D C O P Y//SUBHEADING PARA 12//

NOFORN  
SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/MAG (HOPKINS AND HARRIS), PM, AND INR  
(SWEET); DOD FOR DASD WHELAN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/06/2018  
TAGS: [MARR](#) [MASS](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [EAID](#) [TS](#)  
SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR US-TUNISIA JOINT MILITARY  
COMMISSION MEETINGS

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

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Summary  
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¶1. (S) Tunisian military officials, including Minister of National Defense Kamel Morjane, are looking forward to the twenty-third US-Tunisia Joint Military Commission (JMC) meetings in Washington on May 12-14. The Government of Tunisia is proud of our long history of strong military cooperation and close bilateral ties. Main themes the Tunisian delegation is likely to raise include security assistance needs, the regional terrorist threat, AFRICOM and bilateral military and civilian cooperation. US officials may wish to draw from suggested themes (para 12) encouraging the GOT to provide more complete and up to date information on their security assistance needs, to increase participation in multilateral exercises, and to engage on our proposals for a status of forces agreement. End Summary.

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Background  
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¶2. (C) Our overall relationship with Tunisia remains solid, and Tunisians recognize that good relations with the United States are important to Tunisia's future. That said, the GOT suffers from a top-down decision-making culture, leading to bureaucratic inertia in the absence of formal decisions at the policy level and missed opportunities for US-Tunisian cooperation in many areas. The President's Freedom Agenda constitutes a critical element of our relations with Tunisia, and we continue to promote political reform. We also seek to increase Tunisia's cooperation in combating terrorism and increase economic prosperity through trade, investment, and economic reforms. For its part, the Government of Tunisia (GOT) is anxious to increase commercial ties with the United States, as it seeks to diversify its trading partners and in hopes of promote economic growth and employment. Both governments see military assistance programs and joint military exercises involving US military personnel on Tunisian soil as beneficial. On regional issues, the GOT is quietly supportive of our efforts in Iraq and the Middle East Peace Process. However, the government-controlled media regularly criticizes our policies in the region.

13. (S/NF) Domestically, the GOT is under increasing pressure to deliver economic prosperity. High world oil and food prices are straining the national budget, which primarily funds economic and social programs, including education and health. At the same time, unemployment rates in Tunisia are chronically high -- officially 14 percent and much higher among university graduates and rural populations. These economic pressures contribute to the social unrest that can fuel extremism. In December 2006 and January 2007, the GOT killed 12 members of a terrorist cell that allegedly was planning attacks against the US and UK Embassies and personnel, among other targets. Security forces arrested thirty others, all of whom were convicted of various terrorism-related crimes. Since then, the GOT has arrested and tried hundreds of young people for terrorist activities. While some officials are reluctant to admit to the growing terrorist threat, Tunisian intelligence cooperation with the United States and other partners has improved somewhat in recent months.

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Security Assistance  
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14. (C/NF) The recurring theme in our military relationship is Tunisia's need for consistent US security assistance, particularly Foreign Military Financing (FMF). Although pleased with the more than \$8 million in FMF that Tunisia is likely to receive in FY2008, the GOT was disappointed to learn that the Administration's request for FY2009 funding is closer to \$2 million. This significant cut directly impacts the Tunisian military's readiness and counterterrorism capabilities, at a time when it is taking on additional counterterrorism (CT) responsibilities domestically.

Minister Morjane responded particularly negatively to the news of the decrease and since became reluctant to discuss Tunisia's FMF needs. However, Morjane understands that the JMC represents an important opportunity for him to lay out Tunisia's military assistance needs. In this context, he may note that \$10 million in FMF would do much to strengthen Tunisian capabilities. Specifically, Tunisia would use additional FMF to maintain, upgrade and modernize Army, Air Force and Navy assets, many of which Tunisia obtained from the United States over thirty years ago.

15. (C/NF) The GOT is appreciative of the \$10 million in assistance that we will be providing the Tunisian military through the FY2008 Section 1206 authorization. USG officials have repeatedly delivered the message that we will try to identify other supplemental funding sources, and the JMC delegation will be interested in hearing more about these possibilities. However, the GOT may now believe that Congress is its best ally on foreign assistance, and Morjane and others are increasingly taking their arguments directly to Capitol Hill.

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Counterterrorism  
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16. (S/NF) The GOT strongly shares our concern over terrorism, particularly the establishment of al-Qaeda in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Tunisia has tried several terrorist suspects who have been extradited from Libya and Italy, and conducts several active counterterrorism training/exercise programs with a variety of US agencies. That said, the GOT should have been more forthcoming about the thwarted terrorists attacks and operations from December 2006-January 2007, as well as the current threat environment and CT domestic operations.

17. (S/NF) This intelligence deficit is attributable to a Tunisian desire not to share information concerning internal security. The Ministry of Interior takes the lead on terrorism issues, and MOI cooperation has been historically weak, in part due to intelligence compartmentalization within the Tunisian security services. Given the military's limited

intelligence collection capabilities, rather than being unwilling to share/work with us in the CT arena, the reality is that the military may not have a very robust CT capability. The MND is clearly looking to the United States and other partners to help them fill the gaps. Morjane has told us unequivocally that countering terrorism is the number one issue he hopes to address on this trip -- he is open to whatever can be done to strengthen CT cooperation. According to the Director of Military Intelligence, the GOT's primary motivation for joining the Trans-Sahara Counter Terrorism Partnership (TSCTP) was the belief that membership would result in greater intelligence concerning the activities of AQIM and groups operating in the Trans-Sahel region.

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Mil-Mil Cooperation  
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¶8. (C) Our military cooperation program remains active, especially in regard to the State Partnership Program, and the active force Military-to-Military engagement is growing. Tunisia is still among the top recipients worldwide of the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program.

In fact, a high percentage of its officer corps have attended US military schools under this program, including much of its senior military leadership. Unfortunately, our annual combined exercises and other training events declined over the past six years but are again beginning to increase. At a minimum, current levels of exercises and training events are probably sufficient to ensure the potential sea and air access we might require for future US military operations in the region. If Tunisia is to become a more active partner for the United States, it must upgrade and modernize its military hardware as well as force structure and be prepared to engage in multilateral military activities.

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Bilateral Agreements  
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¶9. (C/NF) One issue that has the ability to hinder US-Tunisian military cooperation is the lack of a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA). After several exchanges of draft texts, the GOT has not responded to the latest US version that was presented in January 2007. The GOT has suggested that the judicial aspect of the text is problematic, but has thus far failed to respond directly. The GOT should be reminded that the lack of a SOFA has the potential to derail some aspects of our bilateral military cooperation, including ship visits and exercises.

¶10. (C/NF) More positively, the GOT quickly agreed to an update in the Section 505 Agreement in early 2008. However, an administrative error caused the omission of a key line, and the agreement is in the process of being revised. The correction has been passed to the GOT in late April. Morjane understands that a timely response is needed to ensure the FY2008 funding under Section 1206 can be obligated and delivered. In a meeting with the Ambassador on May 6, he suggested agreement would be forthcoming.

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AFRICOM  
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¶11. (S/NF) Tunisian officials have not explicitly criticized the creation of AFRICOM. However, they are not pleased at being included in AFRICOM, as Tunisia prides itself as a Mediterranean country. Tunisian officials continue to be interested in hearing about US goals for AFRICOM, how it will operate on the continent, and what AFRICOM means for Tunisia, particularly any impact on security assistance. Morjane told the Ambassador on May 6 that Tunisia would welcome an anticipated visit by AFRICOM Commander General Ward.

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## Suggested Themes

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¶12. (S/NF-REL TUNISIA) USG officials may wish to raise the following points with Minister Morjane and the delegation:

For Deputy Secretary Negroponte and NEA A/S Welch:

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- Express appreciation that the GOT provided access for US officials to interview Tunisian terrorist Nouredine Taam following A/S Welch's request in February.
- Request overview of regional terrorism threat and extent of regional information exchange.
- Acknowledging the Ministry of Interior's lead role in combating terrorism, inquire about interoperability of military and security capabilities and operations.
- Encourage more and better information sharing about Tunisia's security assistance needs, including annual updates and specific FMF spending plans. Confirm that the USG wants to continue to help through FMF, Section 1206, and other programs (i.e., we will be "entrepreneurial").
- Acknowledge that bureaucratic delays are a fact of life, but stress the need for timely responses to USG inquiries, training opportunities, etc. Underscore that we want to take maximum advantage of opportunities to expand cooperation.
- Underscore the importance of securing a SOFA.

For Acting PM A/S Mull:

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- Encourage more and better information sharing about Tunisia's security assistance needs, including annual updates and specific FMF spending plans.
- Welcome greater Tunisian participation in multilateral exercises (e.g. Phoenix Express).
- Explain non-FMF security assistance opportunities.
- Underscore importance of securing a SOFA.

For DepSecDef England and DAS/D Whelan

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- Request overview of regional terrorism threat and extent of regional information exchange.
- Acknowledging the Ministry of Interior's lead role in combating terrorism, inquire about interoperability of military and security capabilities and operations.
- Encourage more and better information sharing about Tunisia's security assistance needs, including annual updates and specific FMF spending plans. Confirm that the USG wants to continue to help through FMF, Section 1206, and other programs (i.e., we will be "entrepreneurial").
- Acknowledge that bureaucratic delays are a fact of life, but stress the need for timely responses to USG inquiries, training opportunities, etc. Underscore that we want to take maximum advantage of opportunities to expand cooperation.
- Welcome greater Tunisian participation in multilateral exercises (e.g. Phoenix Express)
- Underscore the importance of securing a SOFA.
- The Tunisian delegation would also welcome the USG's views on:

- -- Non-FMF security assistance opportunities;
- -- Regional terrorist threat and trends;
- -- AFRICOM; and
- -- Bilateral exercises

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Bio Note and Context  
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¶13. (C/NF) Bio Note: Kamel Morjane, who has served as Minister of National Defense for almost three years, is one of our most polished and direct GOT interlocutors. He has regular access to President Ben Ali and noted that he would be meeting with him prior to departing for the United States.

Morjane can be expected to frankly but diplomatically deliver Tunisia's views on military and civilian cooperation, Tunisia's needs for US assistance and the regional terrorist threat. Unlike many in the GOT, Morjane is keenly aware of the risk of domestic terrorism in Tunisia and recognizes the role of the state, the media, and perceptions of US policy in exacerbating this threat. US officials can press Morjane for his honest personal views on broader bilateral issues.

¶14. (C/NF) Context: While some in the Tunisian delegation have attended past JMCs, the de facto face of the Tunisian military, BG Mahmoud Ben Mohamed, retired as Air Force Chief of Staff in early 2008. His departure means that the Tunisian military has lost important institutional knowledge about its US interlocutors. Similarly, after three years on the job, Minister Morjane may also be slated to move on in the near future. This JMC presents an opportunity to establish strong personal ties with and to deliver clear messages to other, more junior members of the delegation.

Please visit Embassy Tunis' Classified Website at:  
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/tunis/index.cfm>  
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